

Daily Oklahoman
July 6, 2005

Uncertain Future; CAFTA Moves to the House

SENATE passage of a free trade agreement between the United States and six Latin American countries shifts attention to the House, where prospects are uncertain. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) cleared the Senate 54-45, with both Oklahoma senators voting yes. The agreement would further open a market of 44 million people in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, whose imports, most of them, already enter the U.S. duty free. CAFTA's greatest effect will be to remove tariffs on American agricultural and manufactured exports. Last year the region bought about \$15 billion in U.S. goods.

House Democrats think CAFTA's worker-rights provisions are inadequate and would allow abuses that would undercut wages to U.S. workers. Lawmakers from sugar beet- and sugar cane-growing areas oppose the deal because it would open a small portion of the U.S. market to Latin American producers.

We believe in the fundamental benefits of free trade. Over the course of time, America's economy is helped by the open markets that result when countries drop tariffs and other trade restrictions. U.S. trade policy hasn't been as consistent as it could have been. The Bush administration has touted free trade, but it also has imposed tariffs on imported steel. Still, CAFTA will foster freer trade between the U.S. and democracies in the hemisphere, some of which are not that long removed from rule by military dictators. They need a fair trading relationship with the United States that will strengthen their economies while building trust among their people.

President Bush wants to sign CAFTA before Congress retires for its August break, and a House vote is expected this month. Free trade often requires lawmakers to rise above parochial and short-term interests for the good of the entire country. This is such a time. The House should follow the Senate's lead and endorse CAFTA.